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ABSTRACT

Nontraditional college students are causing institutions of higher learning to re-think the focus of academic and student affairs programs. Nontraditional students have needs that differ from traditional-age students. The willingness of institutions to modify existing programs and develop new services geared to adult populations will have a positive impact on their ability to attract, serve, and satisfy the educational needs of adult students. (ABL)

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Nontraditional College Students

James M. Benshoff and Henry A. Lewis

Nontraditional Students Defined

Cross (1980) defines the *nontraditional student* as an adult who returns to school full- or part-time while maintaining responsibilities such as employment, family, and other responsibilities of adult life. These students also may be referred to as "adult students," "re-entry students," "returning students," and "adult learners." Because developmental needs, issues, and stressors for adults differ considerably from those faced by younger, "traditional-age" students, all aspects of the college environment must be reconsidered (and often reconfigured) to respond to this growing student population (Benshoff, 1991). Over the last 20 years, the percentage of older students on campuses has increased dramatically. From one-third to one-half of all college students are classified as nontraditional and more than 50% of all graduate students are over 30 years of age (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980). "Adults are the fastest-growing segment of all the population groups in higher education" (Brazziel, 1989, p. 116) and this trend is expected to continue.

Characteristics of Nontraditional Students

A number of factors characteristically separate nontraditional students from younger college students. Adult learners tend to be achievement oriented, highly motivated, and relatively independent with special needs for flexible schedules and instruction appropriate for their developmental level (Cross, 1980). Adults generally prefer more active approaches to learning and value opportunities to integrate academic learning with their life and work experiences (Benshoff, 1991). Financial and family concerns are two of the biggest considerations that impact on the adult student experience. Additional factors (Richter-Antion, 1986) which distinguish nontraditional students from traditional students include:

- stronger consumer orientation (education as an investment)
- multiple non-school-related commitments and responsibilities
- lack of an age cohort, and
- limited social acceptability and support for their student status (operating outside of traditional adult roles)

Why Adults Return to School

Many nontraditional students come back to school to complete educational pursuits they began years before as traditional-age students. They may have dropped out of education for a number of reasons, including financial considerations, competing responsibilities, and lack of focus, motivation, and maturity. Changing job requirements or career changes often force adults to get additional education to survive or advance in the job market (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980). According to Brazziel (1989), "the ever upward progression of an educated adult population and workforce and [increased educational requirements for] high-paying jobs...might be the single most powerful factor" (p. 129) in the continued influx of adult students on college campuses. Other major reasons that adults return to college include family life transitions (marriage, divorce, death), changes in leisure patterns, and self-fulfillment (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980).

Aslanian and Brickell (1980) proposed a "triggers and transitions" theory that relates the adult's decision to return to school to developmental issues and crises faced during midlife. Transitions (the movement from one status to another) require new knowledge, skills, and/or credentials that often lead people back to college. Triggers are events that precipitate the timing of an adult's decision to return to school, most frequently career events and family changes

Needs of Nontraditional Students

Nontraditional students need many different kinds of support and assistance from family, friends, and institutions of higher learning. Research evidence suggests that "both [sexes] have difficulties juggling the roles of student, worker, and family member" (Muench, 1987, p. 10). Adult students need help in building their self-confidence as students, in acquiring or refreshing study skills, and in managing their time and other resources while in school. In addition, adult students benefit from opportunities to interact with their peers and need to be actively involved in the educational process through sharing their relevant work and life experiences (Muench, 1987).

Research on Nontraditional Students

Clayton and Smith (1987) identified eight primary motivations for nontraditional women students' decisions to pursue an undergraduate degree: self-improvement; self-actualization; vocational; role; family; social; humanitarian; and, knowledge. Many of these women (56%) cited multiple motives for returning to school. In a study of married re-entry women students, Hooper (1979) found that: the longer the woman had been a successful student, the higher her self-esteem; the longer the woman had been in school, the higher the anxiety experienced

by the husband; and, the more traditional the roles and responsibilities within the family, the greater the guilt the woman experienced about her student role. Other developmental issues for women who return to school (Terrell, 1990) include:

- feeling guilty about not "being there" for their children
- concerns about quality and expense of childcare
- feelings of responsibility for maintaining their role within the family
- making compromises in careers due to family considerations
- minimal individual free time
- perceived lack of credibility when returning to college
- insufficient support from family for returning to school

Research on nontraditional male students is limited. Muench (1987) found that both sexes experienced fears of failure and self-doubt. Men, however, suffered more from lack of self-confidence, while women experienced more guilt. Among the nontraditional students studied by Bauer and Mott (1990):

- men were changing careers while women were looking to advance within the same career field
- women more than men experienced competing pressures of child care, financial, and school responsibilities
- men more than women tended to be frustrated about loss of time and money in returning to school

Implications for Student Affairs

Nontraditional students present some major challenges for institutions of higher learning whose programs and services have been geared to the traditional-age student population. Studies of adult students have identified a number of additional services to better meet their needs, including:

- separate registration, advising, and orientation
- greater availability of and access to parking
- more evening and weekend course offerings
- special assistance with financial aid and housing, and
- better preparation of faculty and staff to meet the needs of adult students

Thon (1984) found that the student services most often implemented for adults were counseling- and career-related. Services that adults considered important (but which were least often available to them) included health services, publications for adults, and qualified staff to work with nontraditional students. In addition, colleges must offer social activities appropriate for both older students and their families. Innovative and creative approaches often must be implemented to effectively communicate information about both academic and student services programs to nontraditional students who almost all commute and attend school part-time.

Conclusion

Nontraditional students are causing institutions of higher learning to re-think the focus of academic and student affairs programs. Research has shown that nontraditional students have needs that differ from those of traditional-age students (Richter-Antion, 1986; Thon, 1984). The willingness of institutions to modify existing programs and develop new services geared to adult populations will have a positive impact on their ability to attract, serve, and satisfy the educational needs of adult students.

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